CAN THERE BE A CHRISTIAN GENTLEMAN?

By Karl Löwith

THE social phenomenon of the Christian gentleman as we observe it in England and New England lives by two principles or principal ways of life. These principles are, however, at first not noticeable as two different and even opposite principles because it is the very achievement of the Christian gentleman to blend one with the other in such a way that the result seems to be a harmonious perfection. To show the essential difference between a gentleman and a Christian we may start with a historical reflection on the ideal of the former.

I

The gentleman-ideal has no Christian origin. Many great civilizations before Christ and outside the Christian world have set up and developed such an ideal as a pattern of perfect behavior. First of all the Chinese. In the *Analects* of Confucius [1] many passages describe the gentleman or Chün-Tzu. Chün means ruler, Chün-Tzu son of a ruler. As a member of the upper class he is contrasted with the lower class of "small" people. He is a superior man by birth, character, and behavior. He is bound by a particular code of manners and morals, the latter not independent of the first but reflected in them. His deportment is one of perfect propriety and ease. He is well tempered and well balanced, a man of perfect self-control and self-respect. Thanks to his moral training he is without fear and fret, indifferent to success and adversity. "A true gentleman is calm and at ease; the small man is fretful and ill at ease. . . . The gentleman is dignified but not haughty, common people are haughty but never dignified. . . . The true gentleman is easy to serve but difficult to please, common people are difficult to serve but easy to please." The gentleman avoids all such extremes as lavishness and frugality, he follows the middle way between too much and too little. This

[1] See in particularly IV, 16; VII, 36; XIII, 25, 26 in the translation of A. Waley.

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maxim is not particular to Confucius but common to all rational ethics; it is most explicitly developed in the classical Greek ethics.

The Greek term for the gentleman is *kalos-kagathos.*[2] The Greeks felt keenly the difference between the well bred and the *banausos,* between the noble and vulgar. The gentleman is well bred, good looking, and in perfect proportion, while the manners of the *banausos* are vulgar like those of artisans, porters, and slaves. In Plato's ideal state the education of the gentleman begins when children begin to play. Etiquette about sitting, or rather lying down and rising up, about the haircut, about shoes and garments, and bodily posture belongs to the education of a gentleman.

To us who have been brought up within a religious tradition which has intensified man's moral sensibility but disengaged it from manners and class distinctions, most of the Chinese and Greek concern about "manners" seems to be trivial, for we do not think of morals in terms of manners. But in all genuine cultures manners imply also morals and vice-versa. Morals are at first *mores,* i.e., habits. It is the privilege but also the predicament of Christian ethics that its extreme standards of love, humility, and self-surrender cannot be standardized and adequately embodied in habits and manners.

The most complete description of the Greek ideal of a gentleman we have from Aristotle.[3] The gentleman is *megalopsychēs,* i.e., magnanimous, generous, and high-minded. His excellence and virtue appear in very concrete details, e.g., in the right use of wealth. He will expend freely but well, upon the temples, sacrifices for the gods, on his city's navy, on the chorus of the theater, and preferably on works of permanent value, while the *banausos* spends big sums on trifles to show off. The high-minded man respects himself for he regards himself as worthy of high things. "The man who thinks himself worthy of less than he is really worthy of is unduly humble." The proud claims what is in accordance with his merits while the others go to excess or fall short—a perfectly natural and reasonable ethic, but not at all Christian!

Further, high-mindedness can only exist on a large scale and in a big frame. Little people, says Aristotle, may be neat and modest but cannot be beautiful and high-minded. The gentleman has a sound pride in giving as well as in accepting honors. He will, how-

[2] See T. R. Glover, *Greek Byways* (New York, 1932), p. 157 ff. on "The Manners of a Gentleman."

[3] *Nic. Ethics* 1122a–1123a; 1123b–1125a.

ever, prefer to give for in giving he remains independent while in receiving he becomes obliged to others. He will ask for scarcely anything but will give help readily. He is unassuming toward those of the middle class but dignified towards people of good fortune and high position. He will not regard trivial compliments from trivial people. He does not make cheap compliments nor speak ill of others, not even of his enemies "unless it is purposely to insult them." He is essentially truthful, open in his love and hate. The Greek gentleman is, like the Chinese, slow in his movements, sedate in his manners; he will not hurry and say "I am busy." He never lacks proportion. He has the gift for knowing the right things to do and to say, and the right way to do and to say them, and the right company in which to do and to say them. His brothers are not his neighbors but other gentlemen. He is a man of taste and a law to himself, self-contained and self-sufficient like the eternal circular motion of the heavenly spheres. The life of a gentleman, says Aristotle, will never revolve around another person unless he be an equal or a friend. To Aristotle this true proportionate pride is "the crown of the virtues the price of which is honor." But, says Aristotle, it is hard to be truly proud for it is impossible without being *kalos-kagathos.* Proud men, he concludes, are often thought to be disdainful, but the proud man despises justly while the many do so at random. That is his kind of "righteousness." Measured by the standards of St. Paul and Augustine, all these virtues are but "splendid vices," refined expressions of human pride, though of a pride which is disciplined and well balanced.

About two thousand years lie between the Chinese and Greek conceptions and our modern, predominantly English ideal of a gentleman, and yet our Western ideal shows all the essential features of the *Chün-Tzu* and *kalos-kagathos.* The reason for this identity is that the gentleman-ideal is a common product of higher civilization and as such is independent of the Christian religion or any transcendent ethics. The English word "gentleman" [4] is derived from the Latin word *gens,* i.e., race and family. *Gentilis* is one who belongs to a noble family, to the ruling or upper class, the gentry. Up to the nineteenth century the gentleman was distinguished by his social status and the possession of a coat of arms. As such, he is distinguished from the yeoman, tradesman, and husbandman who are not

[4] See the article "Gentleman" in the *Encyclopædia Britannica.*

well-born and well-bred and thereby incapable of being gentle. The gentleman as we know him from Lord Shaftesbury and Chesterfield and innumerable minor figures is, like the Chinese and Greek gentleman, a man of self-control and self-respect, well-tempered, conscientious, considerate, and gracious. Now, gentleness, modesty, and conscientiousness are usually held to be also Christian virtues though perhaps not the most exacting ones. But even apart from the outstanding virtues of Christian ethics there is a very deep though subtle difference between the conscientiousness, considerateness, and modesty of a gentleman and of a Christian, as J. H. Newman has beautifully pointed out.[5]

The gentleman is not a creation of Christianity but of civilization, even if civilization simulates the virtues of Christianity. To the gentleman the source of conscience is not the will of God but the dictate of his own cultured mind. He is conscientious out of self-respect but self-respect is not a Christian virtue. And when he does wrong he does not feel contrition of which God is the object, but remorse and a sense of degradation. He is modest and his modesty may seem like humility, but Christian humility is the most difficult of all virtues for a self-respecting person. The gentleman's modesty is a temporary relinquishment of the privileges of his own station; it is an act of condescension toward those on a lower level, yet as a gentleman he never loses his sense of superiority which even increases by the natural pride of being capable of condescension. To claim this kind of modesty as humility would be hypocrisy. There is a world of difference between the gentleman's prudent moderation, modesty, and condescension on the one side, and the "twelve degrees" of humility on the other side. But even a saint can never be sure that natural pride does not enter into his spiritual and bodily self-abasement. If the gentleman is consistent he will have to admit that his standards are not those of a follower of Christ but the standards of a man of the world, i.e., honor and decency, self-respect, and distinction.

It is in particular self-respect, "the very household-god of good society," as Newman calls it, which directs his conduct. Dean Inge once remarked: "If you said to an Anglican bishop you are no Christian, he would hardly feel surprise. It would be a point of debate; but if you say to him you are no gentleman, he would probably never speak to you again." Much can be said in favor of cultured self-

[5] *On the Scope and Nature of University Education* (Everyman's Library), Chap. VII.

respect but much can also be said against it. For the reverse of it is an intense dislike of exposure. The self-respecting gentleman is an enemy of extravagances of all kinds. He shrinks from scenes and he does not make confessions. He always controls his temper and suppresses his emotions. He carefully avoids whatever may cause a jar in the minds of those with whom he is cast. He avoids irritating topics, clashing of opinions, collision of feelings, and all those things which are regarded as out of place. He never hurts another's feelings because he himself does not want to be hurt in turn.

Jesus certainly *did* expose himself, cause disagreement, and hurt the feelings of others, in particular of his fellow Jews, for he was passionate and his message radical and to a decent Roman rather shocking. As Nietzsche has put it in his "Anti-Christ": There is only one gentleman in the whole New Testament, viz., the cultured and sceptical Roman governor Pilate. Nietzsche, in his attempt at restoring the natural and classical virtues of a proud master-morale over against what he called a Christian slave-morale, wrote an impressive passage describing the ideal of a well-bred gentleman. He calls him a *Wohlgeratener* (one who is well-bred), and he says of him: "He is carved from one integral block which is hard, sweet and fragrant as well. He enjoys that only which is good *for him;* his pleasure, his desire ceases when the limits of that which is good for him are overstepped. . . . He is a selective principle; he rejects much. He is always in his own company, whether his intercourse be with books, with men, or with nature; he honors the things he chooses. . . . He reacts slowly to all kinds of stimuli with that tardiness which long caution and deliberate pride have bred in him. . . . He believes neither in ill luck nor guilt; he can digest himself and others; he knows how to forget, he is strong enough to make everything turn to his advantage." [6] It is obvious that this human wholesomeness is not Christian saintliness but a modern version of the Aristotelian high-mindedness.

II

The Christian gentleman is a contradiction in terms because a gentleman is a man of the world while a Christian is a follower of Christ. The most striking proof of the incompatibility of the one with the other is the life of a Christian saint who was indeed a gentleman—

[6] *Ecce Homo*, I, 2; cf. *The Will to Power*, no. 1003 and no. 175.

namely, before he became a Christian! St. Francis was by birth, upbringing, and manners a young gentleman. But after his conversion and decision to follow Christ he became a vagabond, quite careless about his former social status and good manners, training himself instead in the most austere ascetic discipline. He practised indeed the Christian virtues of humility and charity, hope and faith. These Christian virtues are far from being a rational middle way between extremes. The Christian ethics is full of paradoxical tensions between such extremes as life and death (of saving one's life by losing it), of sin and grace, despair and faith, sorrow and joy, power and weakness, the cross and the crown. The Christian virtues are not natural and reasonable virtues of a golden mean but radical virtues of grace.[7] For humility means more than modesty, charity more than benevolence, hope more than looking forward, and faith more than rational belief. Charity to the deserving is not charity but plain justice; it is the undeserving who require charity. Hope means hoping against all empirical evidence, when things are hopeless; it is not the natural effluence of a cheerful temperament but a religious duty and its substance is faith in things invisible. And having faith means believing the incredible and to be certain about things we cannot prove and demonstrate. A gentleman may be very just and generous but the paradoxical justice and apparent injustice of the parables of the prodigal son and of the laborers in the vineyard is beyond his scheme of reference.

On the other hand, it is also impossible to imagine the Apostles and the "internal proletariat" of the early Church as gentlemen. These men who conquered the Roman world of the conquerors would never have evoked the least interest, neither hostility nor enthusiasm, if they had been as wise and philosophical as the gentleman who cares so much about propriety and is therefore unwilling to expose himself and to challenge his fellow men. It is impossible to be a *Christian* gentleman because it is impossible *as a gentleman* to follow Christ. The birth, life, and death of Jesus Christ are anything but gentlemanlike, and the birth, life, and death of a true gentleman are anything but Christ-like.

If nevertheless it seems as though the Christian gentleman were combining the virtues of the one and the other, the reason for this deceptive appearance is that both, the way of the gentleman and the

[7] See G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics*, Chap. XII.

way of the Christian, have deteriorated and are now leveled down to the common standard of an average decency. Modern Christianity has degenerated because it wants not only to live in this world but also to be of it and to benefit from all its inventions. And the gentleman-culture has degenerated because the modern world has become a mass society which has little place for the superior refinement and distinction of the gentleman. This process occurred during the nineteenth century and is strikingly illustrated in the change of the definitions of the gentleman in the *Encyclopædia Britannica.*

In the edition of 1815 a gentleman is still a man of the upper class who bears a coat of arms. In the edition of 1845 the social status of a gentleman is extended to all above the rank of yeomen. In the edition of 1856 the title is generally accorded to all persons above the rank of common tradesmen. The gentleman has become a gentle*man*. He is not any longer distinguished by blood and circumstances. This change indicates that the middle classes have come into their own. And with the growth of modern mass society the gentleman became almost synonymous with man though there are still some curious remnants of the earlier and stricter meaning, for example, in the idiosyncrasies of certain gentlemanly sports like golf and fishing. But on the whole the leveling process is going on, and if eventually everyone who has some education can claim to be a gentleman, nobody will stand out any longer as a superior man. All of us are now gentlemen because none of us is "well-born" and everyone is making a living by earning money. Likewise, all of us are now Christians because we agree with Jews and gentiles on the general principle of tolerance without specific religious convictions. The freedom from business and money-making which formerly was a prerequisite for the education of a gentleman (as it still is for the training of a Catholic priest) became something almost negative in our modern world of labor, business, and industry, where leisure has become mere laziness. As Darwin once wrote in a letter: "Now I am so completely a gentleman that I have sometimes a little difficulty to pass the day." Thus the gentleman is dying out with all that is gracious in him, his code of behavior disappears even in the diplomatic profession, on account of political, social, and economic changes.[8] That is regrettable but unavoidable since the gentleman's

[8] See H. Laski, *The Danger of Being a Gentleman;* cf. F. M. Powicke, *History, Freedom and Religion* (London, 1940), p. 40 f.

morals and manners depend on a certain upbringing, leisure, and wealth.

If the Christian way of life too were essentially dependent on political, social, and economic conditions then the Christianity of the twentieth century could only be a semi-religious version of secular philanthropy and gentleness, socialism, and pacifism. But how can Christianity be dependent on worldly conditions if its very meaning is to transcend the loyalties, standards, and conditions of the *saeculum*? Nothing can prevent serious Christians from bearing witness in the modern industrial world as they did in the ancient pagan world. As a "Christian civilization" and world-historical religion, Christianity may decay and even disappear, but it does not therefore disappear as a faith in the Kingdom of God and as an imitation of Christ. It was the merit of St. Francis within the Roman Church and of Luther in revolt against it to have reformed Christianity according to its genuine standards. Now the time has come to distinguish once more between essential Christianity and the humanistic stream derived from Hellas,[9] for the time has arrived where decisive distinctions have to be made lest Christianity loses all its vigor and taste, as it did for men like Nietzsche and D. H. Lawrence [10] who did nothing but yearn for a transcendent faith in something more than the all-too-human. Their blasphemies are therefore nearer to the Christian faith than to the decency of the gentleman whose supreme standard and concern is self-respect and self-perfection.

If Christianity were not reduced to an adjective of "religion" but maintained as an unconditional and specific faith, the question whether a perfect man of the world can be at the same time a Christian would immediately prove its absurdity. For how could one ever combine self-respect with self-surrender? If anything is beyond doubt in the Old and New Testament it is the emphasis on a distinction, in the Old Testament between the chosen people and the gentiles, in the New Testament between the Kingdom of God and the standards of the world, and in the whole Bible between the will of God and the will of man. To proclaim the Gospel in a world of sin and death cannot be done by way of adjustment but requires a critical distance and disengagement. The Church cannot address the world religiously and efficiently if she has no distinct vantage ground

[9] Cf. THEOLOGY TODAY, Oct. 1944, p. 295.
[10] See D. H. Lawrence, *Posthumous Papers* (New York, 1936), p. 731 ff.

from which to address the world instead of pretending to be co-extensive with it by offering a Christian version of modern secular culture. The world has not essentially changed since the times of early Christianity, nor has the possibility of proclaiming the Christian message to a hostile world by a faithful minority. To be a gentleman in our time may be much more difficult than it was in the times of Aristotle and Shaftesbury. To be a Christian in our time is no more and no less difficult than it was in the first centuries.

The crucial test of being a Christian will always be the attitude toward suffering. When St. Paul was imprisoned he wrote to the Philippians that the things which happened to him would serve "the progress of the Gospel." Those who were imprisoned by the "praetorian guards" of our time felt exactly the same way, if they were really Christians. They did not make an attempt to escape nor did they think about future improvements of state prisons. They took what had happened to them as an opportunity of becoming firm in their faith and of spreading the Gospel. A gentleman too, in such circumstances, will behave differently from a vulgar man. He will nobly bear the hardships, even torture and death, but he will not take up his cross for the sake of the Crucified. Both the gentleman and the Christian are distinct from the natural man who cannot but despair and rebel or adjust himself if deprived of his civic liberties. The external result may thus seem to be almost the same in the case of a Christian and of a gentleman, but the way both achieve their inner freedom is as different as their motivation and aim. The gentleman will patiently suffer for the sake of preserving his self-respect, the Christian will enthusiastically suffer for the sake of Christ who suffered for him. A similar difference could be easily shown in the attitude toward the suffering of others. There is not a single human passion and action which does not have a different key and tone, motive and meaning, if experienced by either a man of the world who has disciplined himself in order to stand it, or a follower of Christ who has, by grace, overcome it and is, therefore, able to stand it. However similar the external appearance may seem, a discerning understanding cannot fail to see the essential difference, so admirably expressed by Augustine in his discussion of Stoic ethics.

To be sure, the Christian message as recorded in the Gospels does not live by any essential polemics against the world or the state or the man of the world who wisely engages in or retires from it. The mes-

sage of Jesus is quite affirmative on account of its eschatological setting. All his parables presuppose a freedom from the world's concern with success and human respectability, a freedom which is so radical and perfect that only saints have ever approximated to it. A critical distinction between Christianity and the world was unnecessary so long as the primitive Church lived in small groups apart from Roman society. But a critical distinction became necessary when Christianity spread out and consolidated within the pagan world, and it becomes even more necessary in our modern world where everything up to a certain degree is still Christian and to an equally uncertain degree is non-Christian, if not anti-Christian. In our ambiguous "Christian world" the Christianity of the gentleman is like the Christianity of a Christian democracy and civilization—an adjective which fails to determine the noun. This ambiguity derives from the worldly success of the Christian Church and at the same time her failure to make the world Christian. Thus we live in a Christian world which still reflects the religious faith in the Kingdom of God but only in its secular transformations. All modern history of the West is still inspired by the quest for the Kingdom of God, but it sets its hope in a "better world" on material production, progress, and welfare. It was St. Paul's verdict on pagan society that "it had no hope," and it is the verdict on our modern, progressive society that it has hope—in the wrong thing, and without substance. The Christian gentleman of the Christian world is only one instance out of many which indicates a general confusion of principles.[11] We may meet a "Christian gentleman" in the flesh, as a social matter of fact, but he does not exist in spirit and principle.

[11] With the exception of Clement of Alexandria, I know of no early Christian writer who ventured to adapt the Christian way of life to that of the ancient gentleman. At a time when the pagan philosopher Celsus dismissed the Christian Church as an association of bakers, fullers, and slaves, Clement stands out as a refined scholar fond of the ancient gentleman. Since at his time families of the pagan upper class began to come over to the Church, he thought it a timely task to baptize certain details of gentlemanlike deportment, dress, entertainment, and expenditure, so that they might be acceptable also to Christians. Clement's *The Pedagogue* is a book of instruction in conduct, morals, and manners, in what one might call the Christian gentleman. He discusses, e.g., whether a Christian should use the customary signet ring of gold. He decides that he may use it, but the device on it should not be a pagan idol but rather a Christian symbol like a dove or a fish. (See T. R. Glover, *op. cit.*, pp. 175 f.)